Midnight
SONNETS

ALSO BY JAN HERMAN

General Municipal Election: A Multimedia Rant

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The Z Collection

Keyboard Mouth

Chapbooks of Deformed Sonnets:

Fourteen; Mortal Coil

Your Obituary Is Waiting

Small Thefts; Mistress Death; Songes (Dreams)

The Way the Lines Break

Midnight
SONNETS

Jan Herman

WITH FLYPAPER COLLAGES
BY NORMAN O. MUSTILL

PHANTOM OUTLAW EDITIONS

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A majority of the midnight sonnets in this collection were published (many in earlier versions) in handmade, limited-edition chapbooks, cards, and folios by Cold Turkey Press in France. Engstler Verlag in Germany brought out a bilingual edition of the first fourteen sonnets (several since revised) in 2017. Moloko Print, also in Germany, published a bilingual edition of sixty of the sonnets in 2020, including some in earlier versions. A handful have also appeared in *Fabrikzeitung* in Switzerland and in *IT: International Times, The Magazine of Resistanc*e in the United Kingdom. The flypaper collages © 1967, 2021 by Norman O. Mustill were first printed by Beach Books, Texts and Documents.

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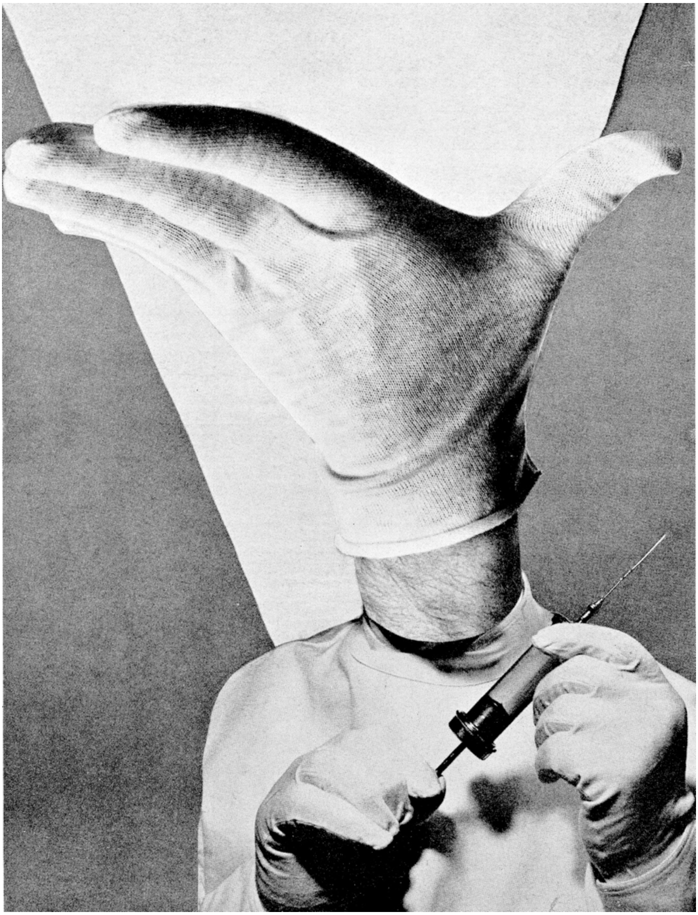
For old friends G.B. and K.S.

What is a midnight sonnet?
A wound scabbed over.

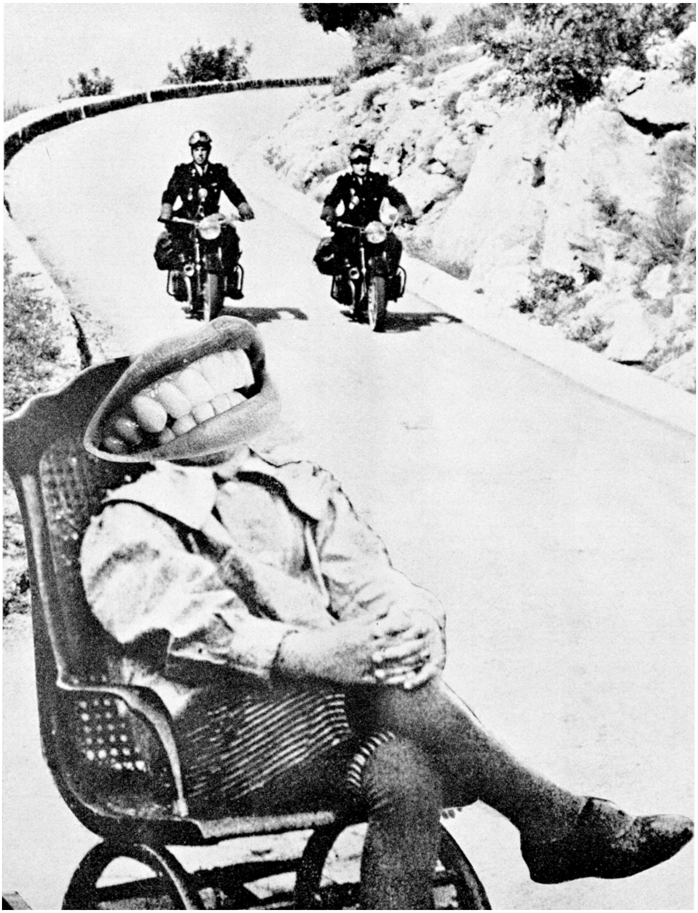
Fourteen

What I'm saying here is not, I agree, poetry,
as poems should be written rarely and reluctantly,
under unbearable duress and only with the hope
that good spirits, not evil ones, choose us for their
instrument. — Czeslaw Milosz



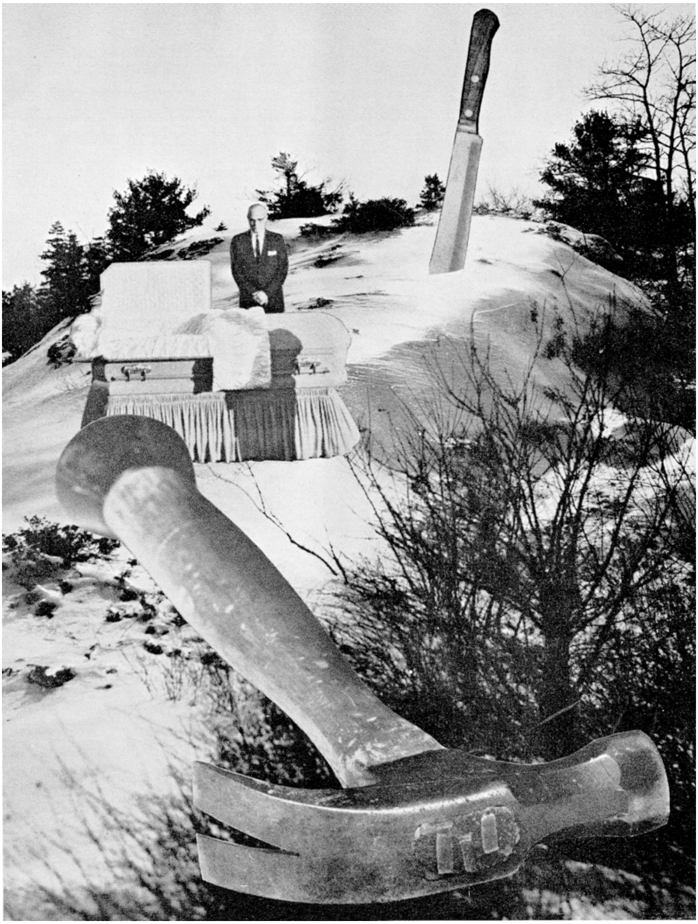
i

I saw the cold glitter
of the winter stars
like milestones along the road —
a dead sea
mute
without shore or limit.
They were extinguished
by the shadow of a lampshade
dying away to brittle ash.
Vague words.
Mute words.
Stolen words reconvened.
Shadow words
that beat like hammers.



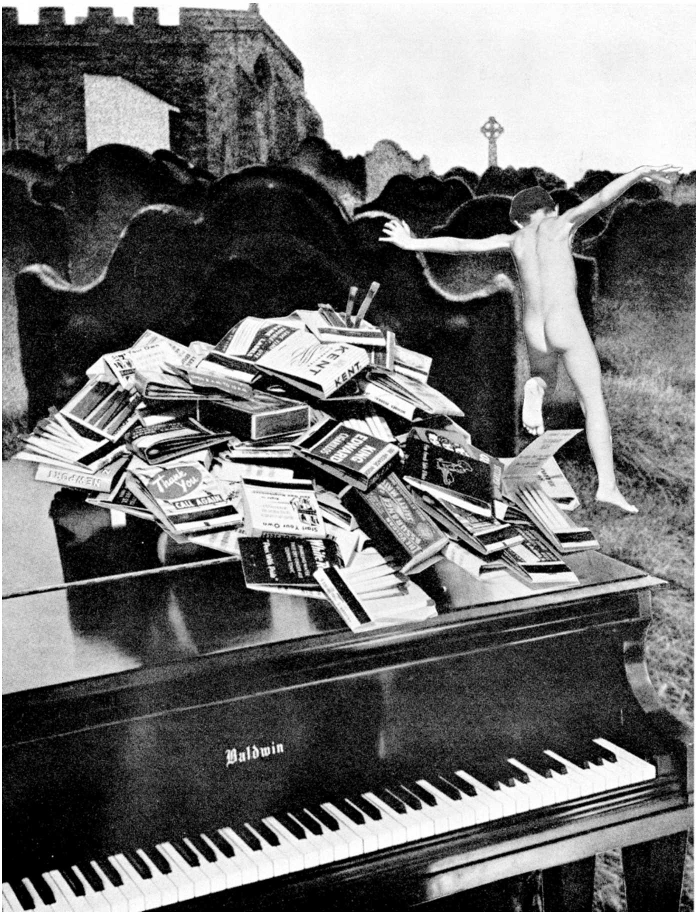
ii

I was there in asphalt
in ozone dreams.
I was waiting
for a cool stare from a window.
I was made of physical coordinates.
I was particle.
I was a dark sea of genetic codes.
I was illegal.
I had listened to laughter
in the next room.
I was gone between the snap
of two fingers.
All the clocks in Switzerland
like a maiden aunt had come to call.



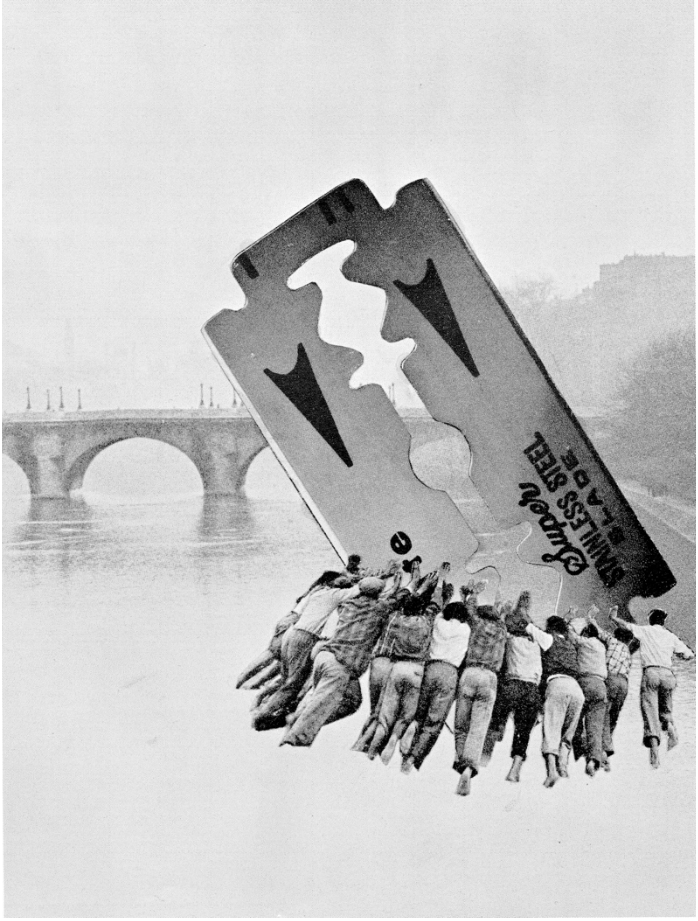
iii

The news so near my breath,
the accounts tied in red ribbon.
It was the chilling dispatch of death.
It was the cigar of an honorable adventure.
It punished the hours.
"Don't move Mister or I'll crack your face."
The ballroom of history bumped and cried.
"Look out! That man is killing everybody!"
The word SHAME crawled across the screen.
A wilting sun had set.
Night was threadbare.
"This is history," someone said.
We were caught in the wheel
of a lethal automat.


KENT
KENT
KING EDWARD
NEWPORT
Thank You
CALL AGAIN
Start Your Own
Baldwin

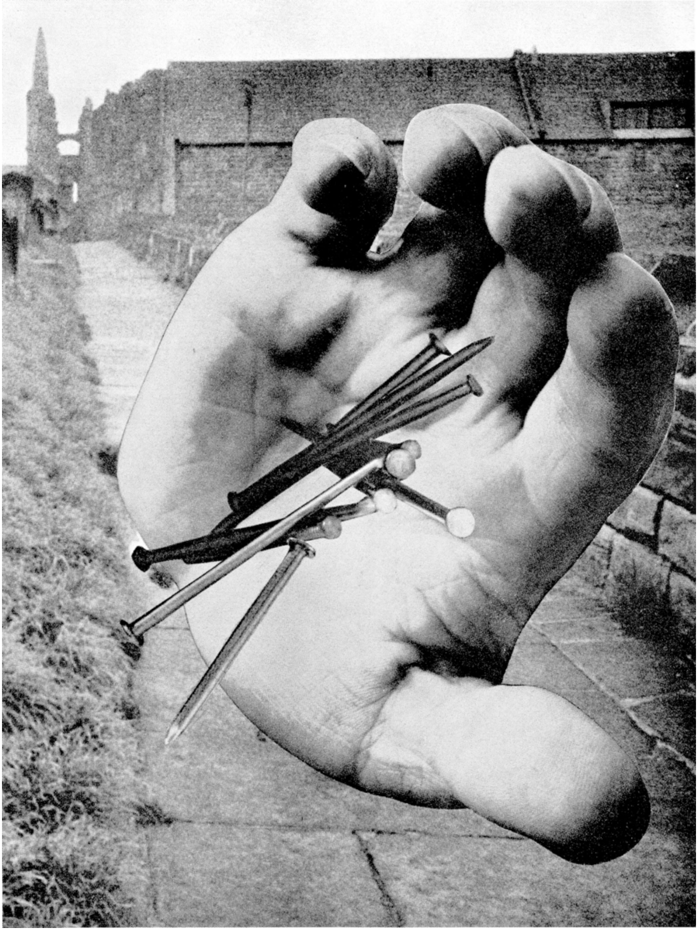
iv

My timetable had become a dream.
The driver turned around.
I was glad never to ride with him again.
He smothered a bad cigarette
under whistling fingers.
It was three in the morning,
the calendar gone in headlights.
Raining *you-don't-live-here-anymore*.
The door to a fatal rendezvous,
a brutal river of words
and sordid avenues of time.
Beneath the lowering sky
with shoes hugged to my chest
I heard him step on the gas.


Super
STAINLESS STEEL
BLADE

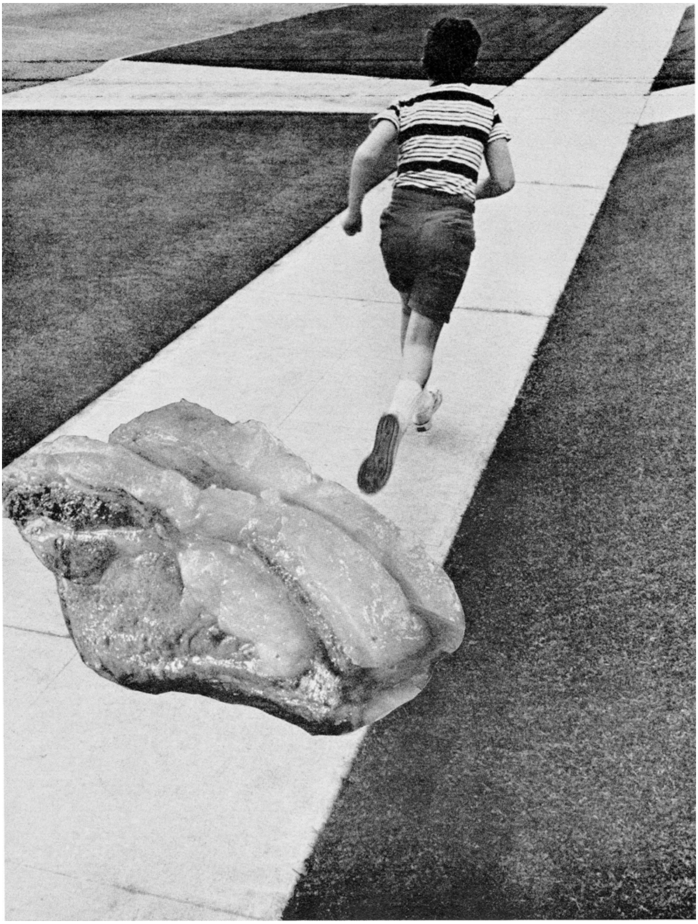
v

In the dirty stockings of Adolf —
that's how we lived.
Our ventriloquist dummies
made a bad bargain.
***Arbeit macht nix*.**
When the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau
is recalled with the mournful whistle
of an imaginary death train,
the vulgar NO!art of Boris Lurie,
a survivor of Buchenwald-Magdeburg,
looms like a signal
from remembered depths.
In the dirty stockings of Adolf
***arbeit macht nix*.**



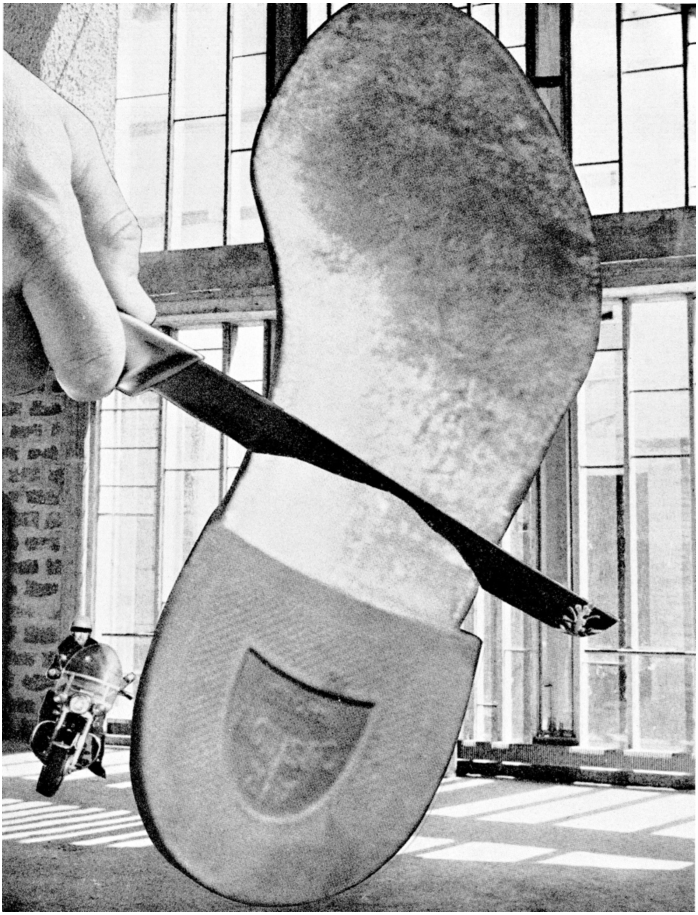
vi

**It was a veil of tears.
It was impalpable.
It was ash and wind.
It was a dark door.
It was mathematical.
It was a lonely maniac with unthinkable secrets.
It was a silent photo.
It was an infection of roses.
It was three in the morning.
It was the noxious sponge of death.
It was a machine.
It was a timetable.
It was a merry-go-round.
Was it nothing at all?**



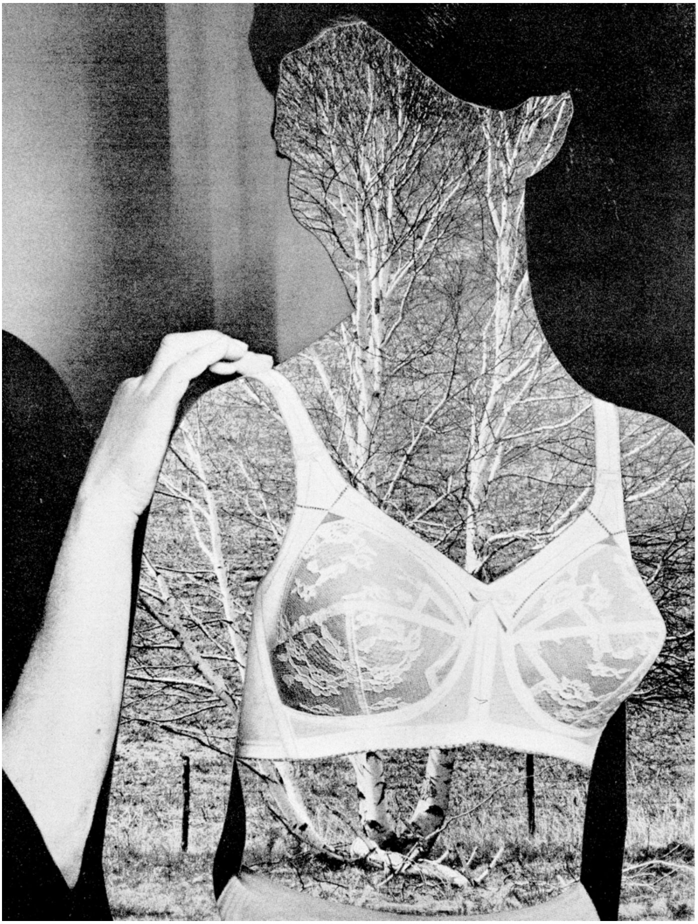
vii

Was it a vivace sneer when Solomon said
the ransom of a man′s soul is his wealth?
Or was it a doloroso kind of wisdom?
Some have said that Solomon really meant
the ransom of a man′s life is his wealth.
Saint Augustine took the meanings equally.
“The purging fire he spoke of with restraint —
ignis purgatorius” — was his secret weapon,
really like the blackmail of Somali pirates.
He scared the bejezus out of sinners
and enriched the coffers of his church.
Was Solomon perversified by Augustine?
Of course he was. Full of life should not
look vicious, nor slow and sad look dumb.



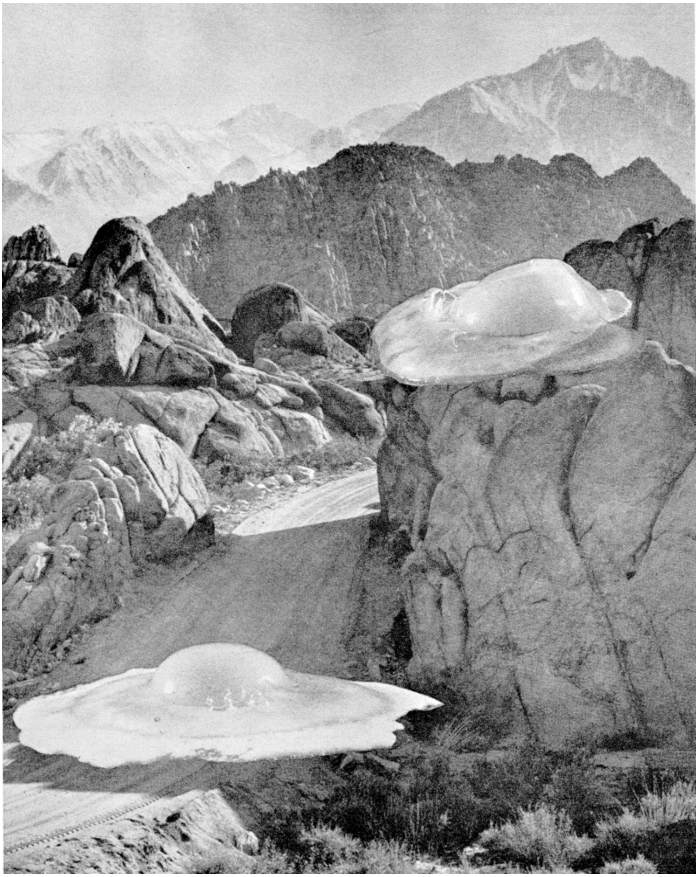
viii

In the pitch black
dream room of panic attacks
his savage absence filled my mind.
Choked for air, I couldn’t sleep.
It was two years nine months ago
he died. He never panted for a name.
A vase of lilies stood alone,
unnoticed among his friends.
His urn of ashes sat within
a cemetery pocket in the earth.
Two stricken sex dolls learned
that each had been his lover to the end.
One dropped rose petals on the urn,
the other bitter tears.



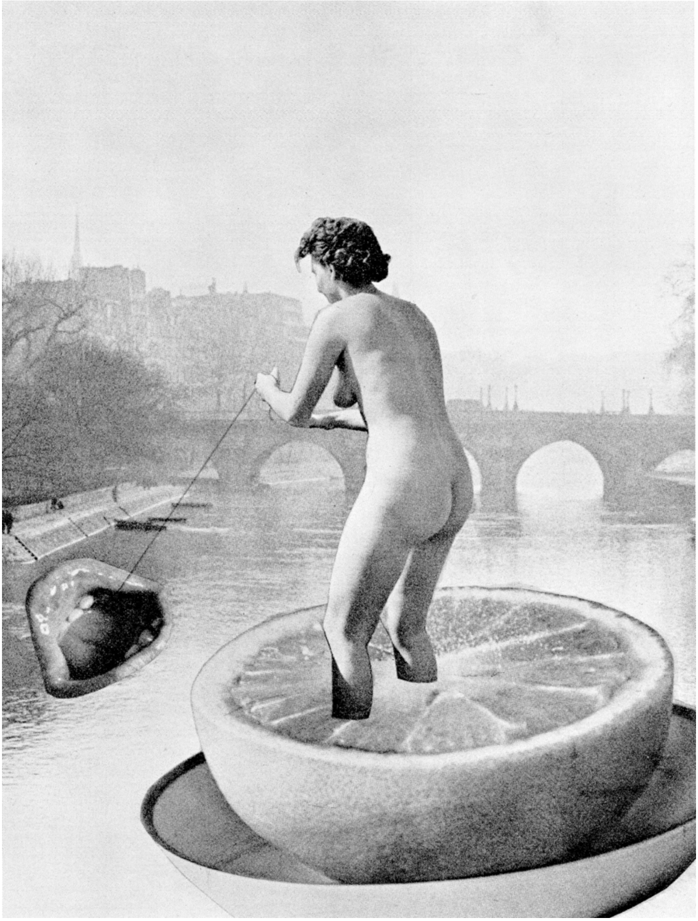
ix

Is someone hammering
on my casket? I know
it's only a brain scan, but
feeling dead this way
is claustrophobic dread.
Merely standing upright
in a cramped elevator
puts me in vertical fear
of dying. This horizontal
pose, stuck with my head
and my nose to the roof
of a low clanging tunnel,
is too close for comfort.
Please pipe in some Mozart.



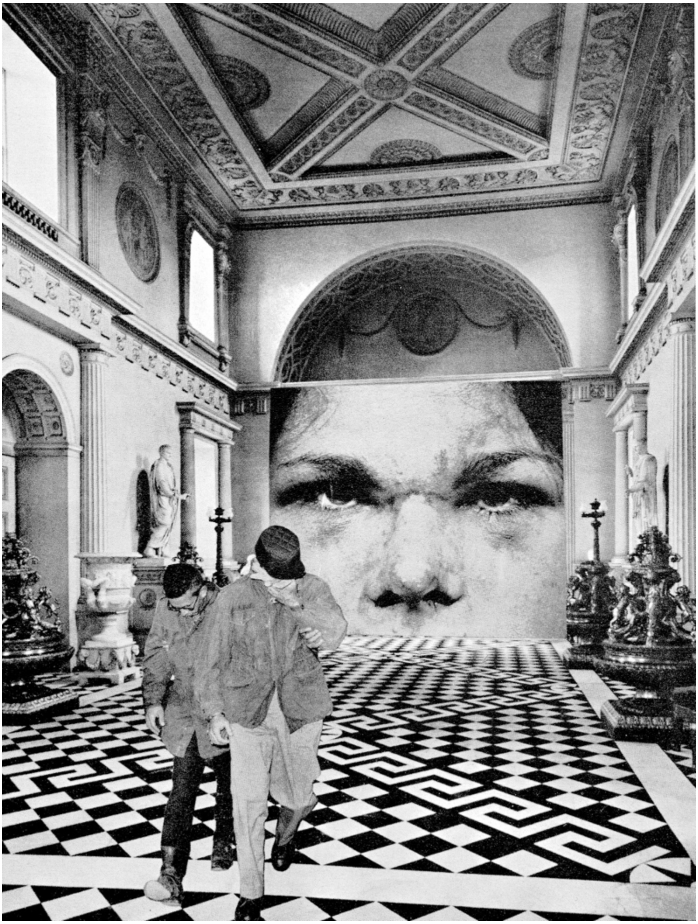
x

the pecker
the bladder
the neck
the foot
the ear
the tooth
the head
the tongue
the kidney
the elbow
the hip
the wrist —
all of them need
a kick in the ass



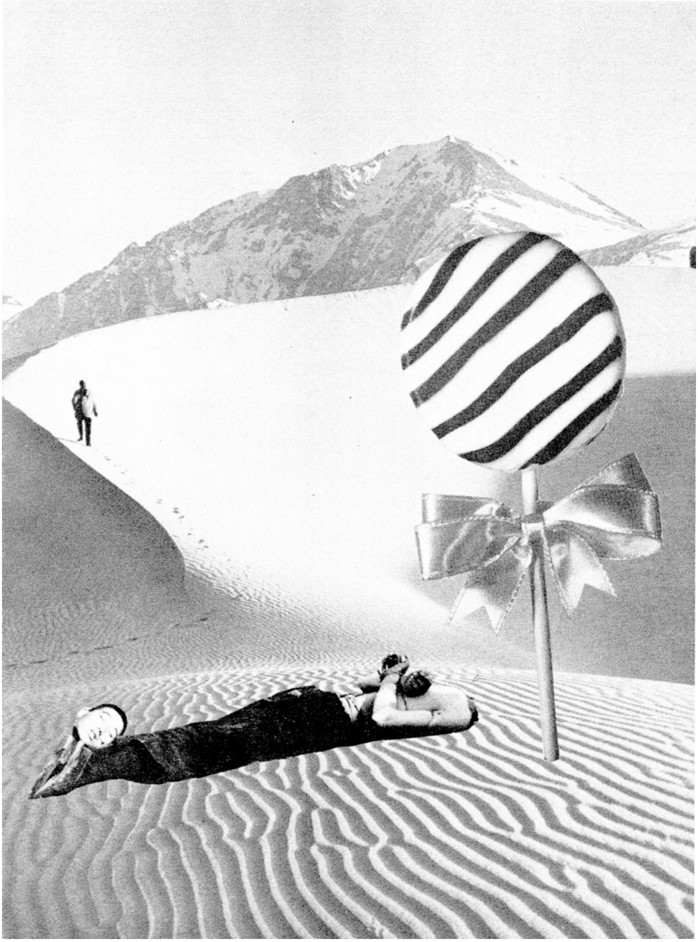
xi

in these
lines
is my
reclusion
an iron
fist rusts
beyond
this
silence
within
each
wave
the dead
cicada



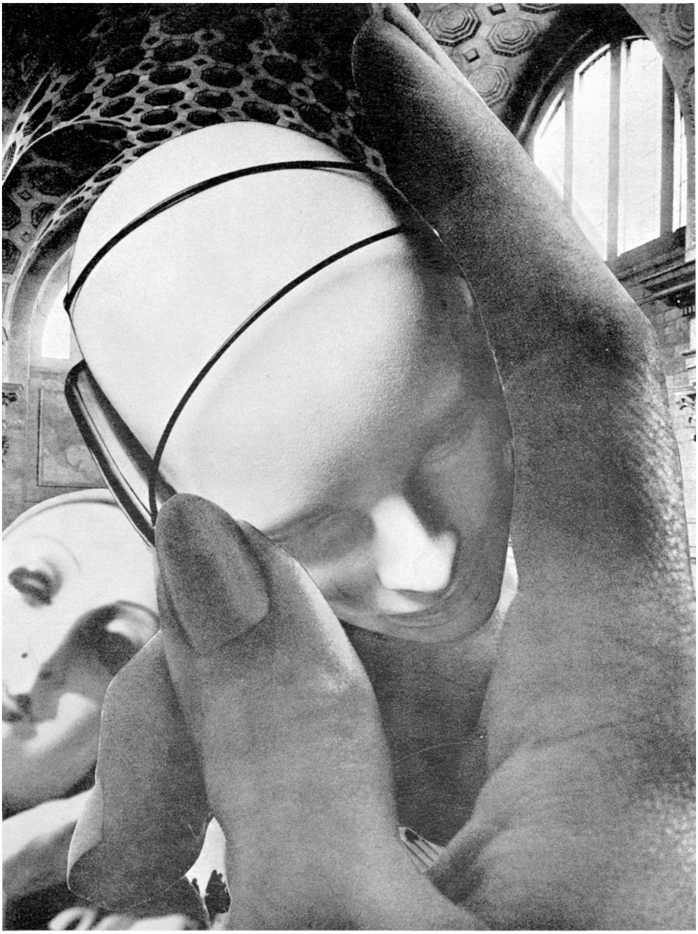
xii

The more books we read
the sooner we perceive
the plague that sweeps us,
a sense of emergency
where faith in human dignity
ignites a modest bomb
in a melancholy heart.
We who wrote trenchant pamphlets
on the gravity of ideas as well to oblivion.
It is the nature of such.
And being paid are their own dupes.
And being shrewd they might as well.
For “art is a luxury,” a friend once said,
whatever the motive for making it.



xiii

Observe how they are written
and fill accounts of plague.
There are no novels plays or biographies
to prop up a very short dowry.
Some have tried for life
to speculate in these commodities.
They have chosen who must allege,
ready enough to crystallize
vast evidence of curiosity.
But word encyclical of art love nature
thinks to dupe with promises.
You accused are doomed to disappoint.
Writer of other? Party over.
Drive fast, Bill, for heavens ache.

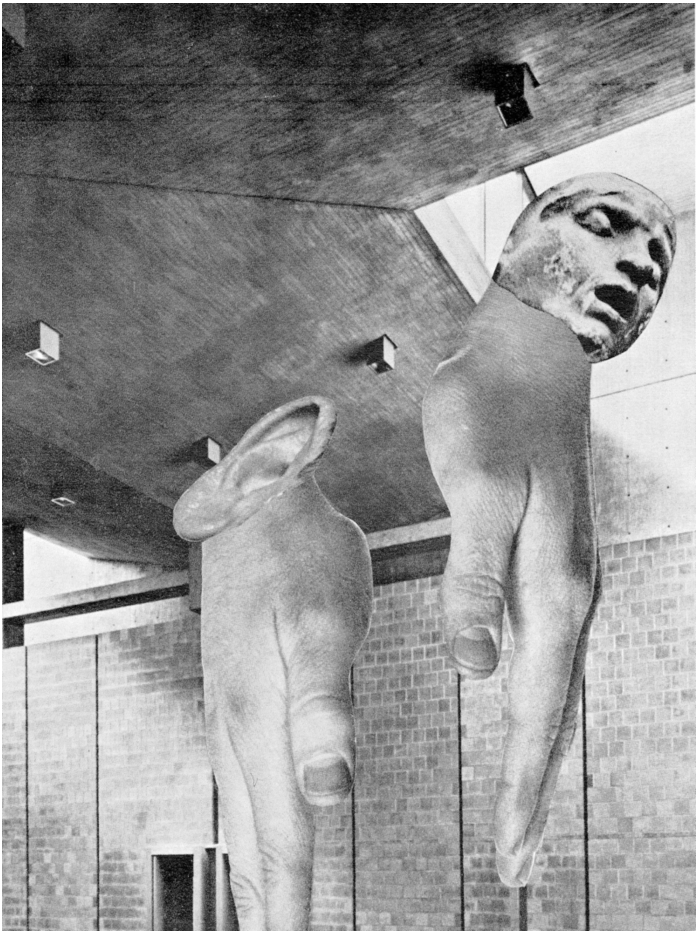


xiv

Yet … *vif, ardent, et fou* —
neither the white silences
nor the black —
Diderot had the right idea.
Grace & good nature
like a transparent forest
rooted in facts,
thoughts like crickets
in dry August grass.
Not to climb the ladder,
not to cling or sneer,
to be invisible —
though poor and weary
a primary force.

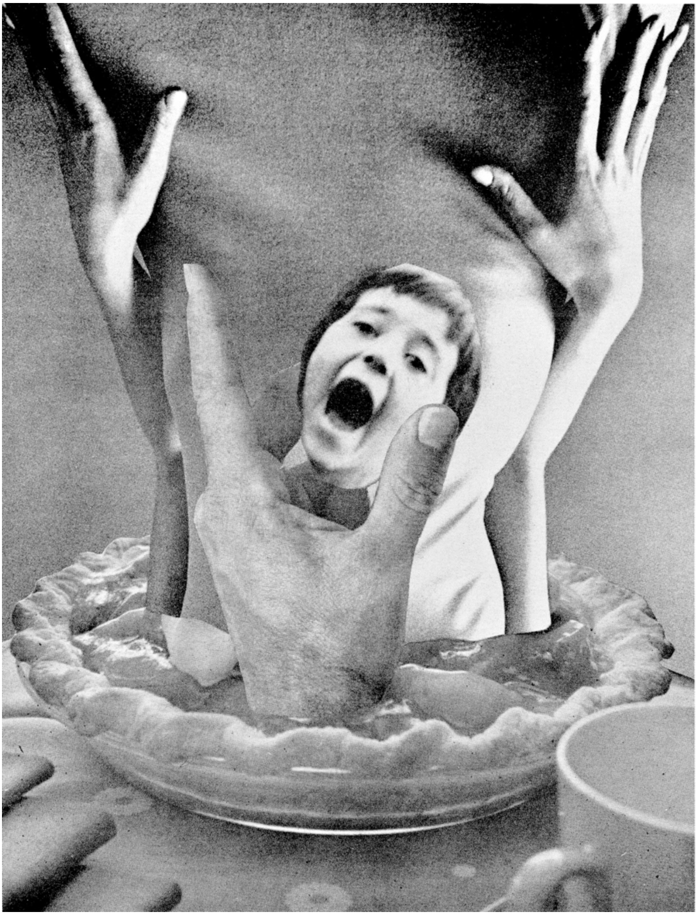
Mortal Coil

“That skull had a tongue in it,
and could sing once.” — Hamlet



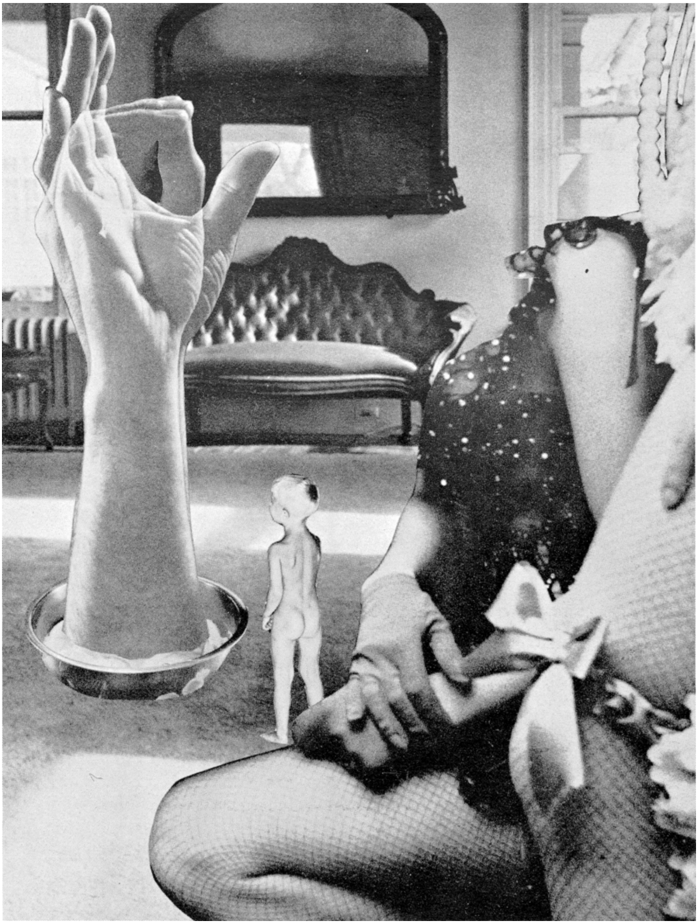
XV

Walked to a hanging
mere poets depend
on their weaknesses.
A thousand tears
bring them closer
to no truth of yours
or mine or anyone's
even if Piaf sang them.
The soon-to-be corpse
did not dance with bells
on its toes like death's
marionette. It died
motionless in the air
with hell on its breath.



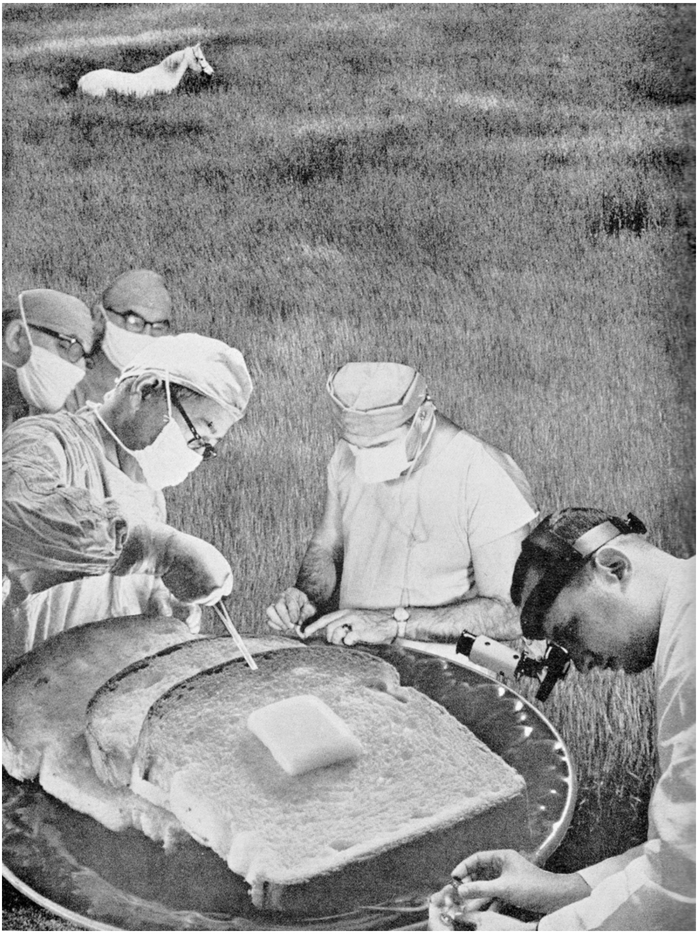
xvi

Past hopes
rise like a ghost.
Immutable.
Indifferent.
Are there no triumphs?
Do dreams perform miracles?
Strindberg said,
"I dream, therefore I exist."
I scribbled.
Stalked by a crazy sage
dressed in weeds,
my unguarded self
was burdened with weariness
like a dog shitting on the sidewalk.



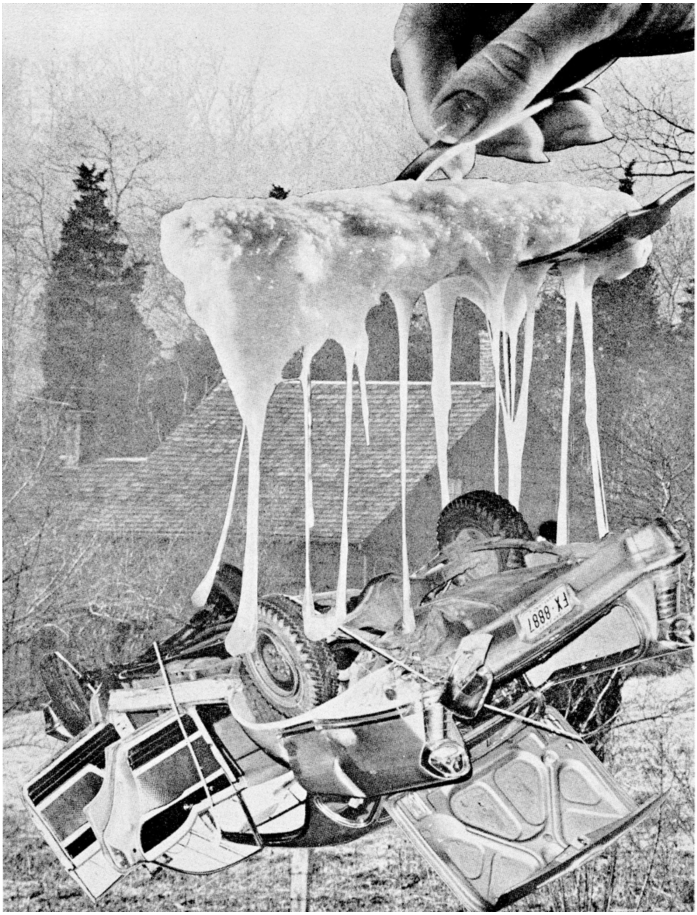
xvii

A simple piano piece,
Schumann's "Träumerei,"
was a tonic. Chopin's
"Chanson de l'adieu" helped.
But neither did the trick.
Like a junky shooting up,
I hoped to escape the pain.
The Inferno gate tells
the burning truth: "Forget
your hopes. They are what
brought you here." Dante
knew the foulness, the pain,
the deformations, told us
what we learn too late.



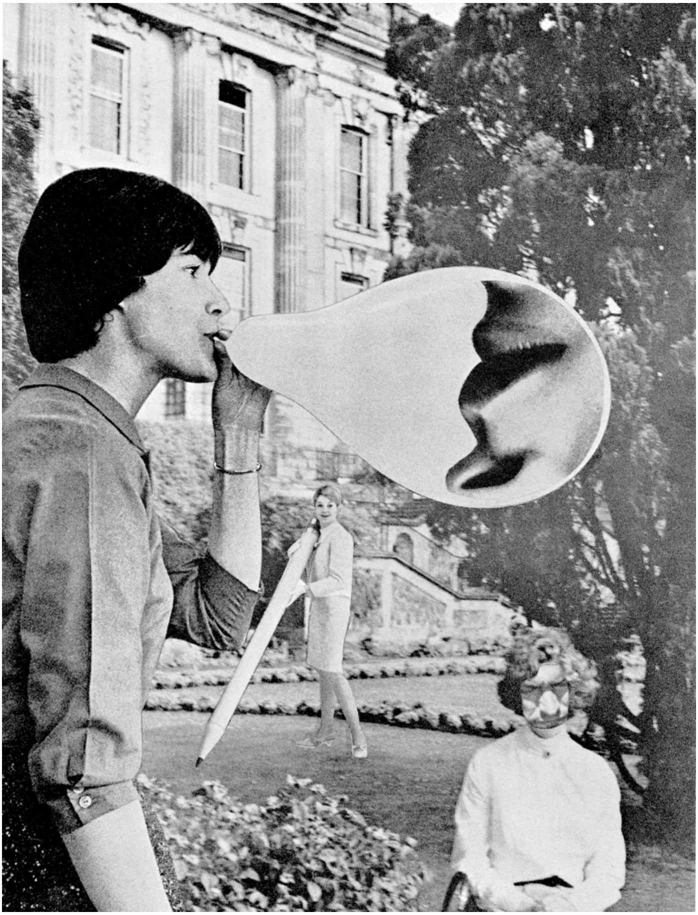
xviii

Mary B foretold
the future. Better
than Rorschach
or Binet,
she could write
your horrorscope.
Her bent hand
drew an iron mask
behind a molten sun.
Her careful eye
deciphered
cloudy ciphers.
Time did its own work —
and took a victory lap.



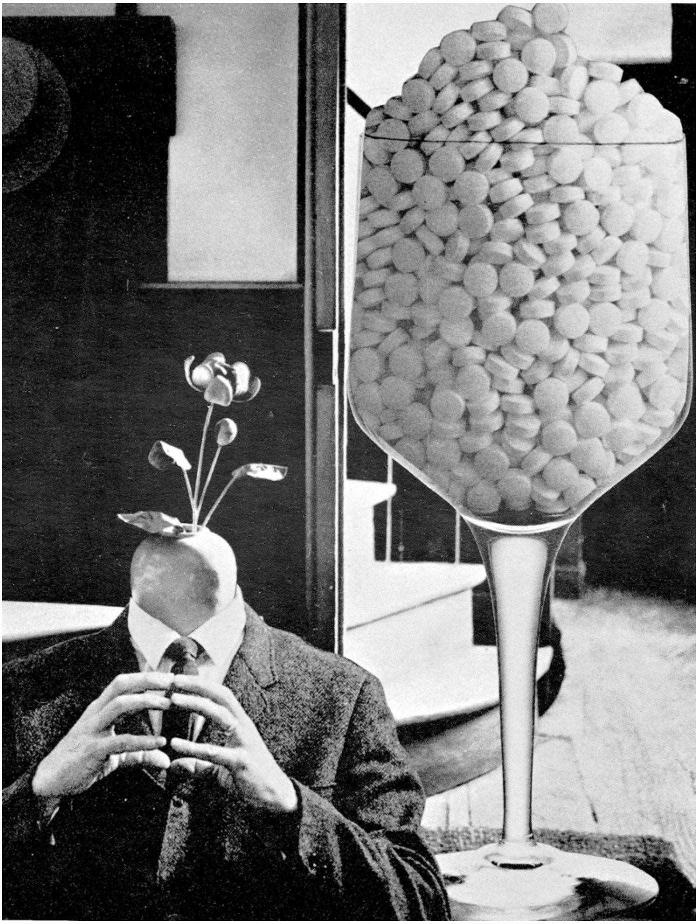
xix

When words died
we who survived
like shapeless
bundles of hope
plugged our ears
with stones.
We locked away
the scars
with the fears
in our heart
and heard
a blackbird singing
in the stillness
of the morning.



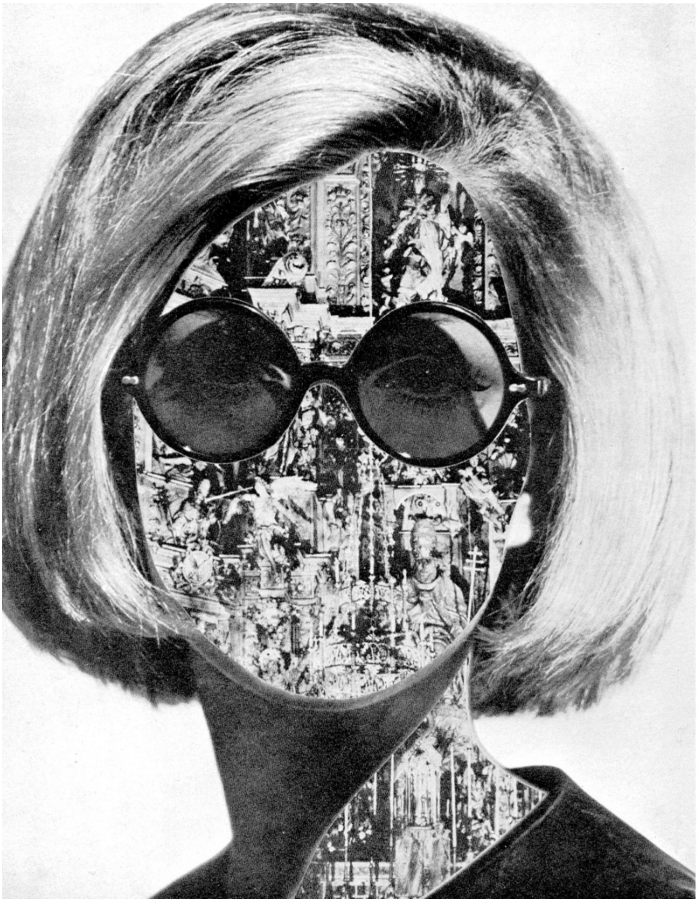
XX

Kisses did not last,
nor did lovely fucks.
When the bridge
we could not cross
loomed above us
at the river Styx,
our past rode by
on a high wind.
If we below were
all forgot, it mattered
not to anyone but us.
So we fucked again
and let our last kiss
restore our bliss.



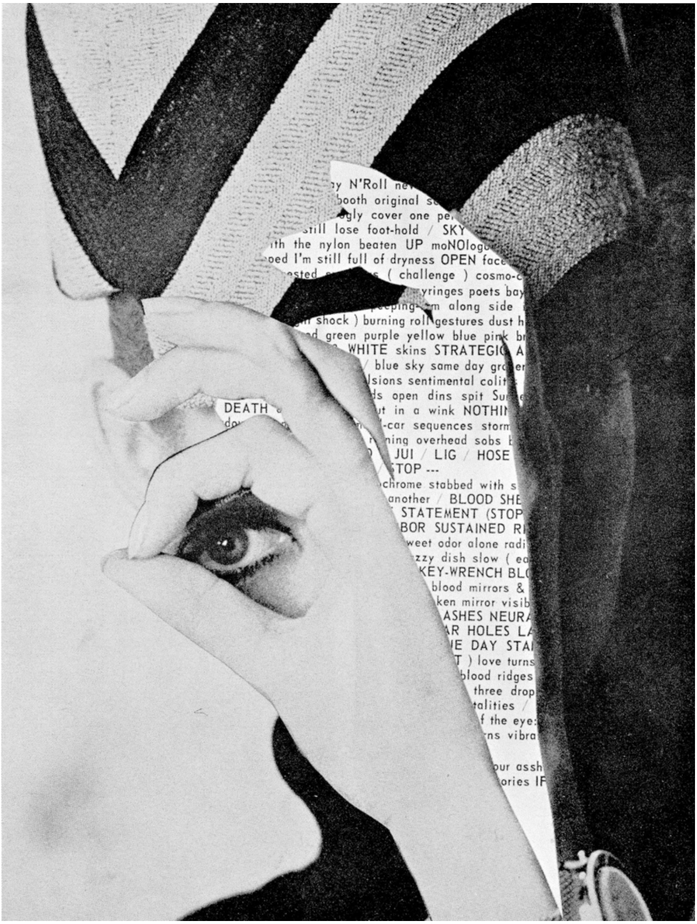
xxi

On the sunny island of friendship
ash was falling from our faces.
“This is not subtle,” the doc said.
He prescribed a regimen of pills
the size of Montaigne’s chateau.
My head shrank to a bungalow
in Far Rockaway, and I recalled
the ghost ship of our childhoods
beached against the boardwalk.
A hurricane had tossed it there.
Here on Grub Street we crash
‘arse first and facing frontwards’
like buckets of dots and dashes
with stories of our heroic travels.



xxii

Deliberately faulty
whipped by the wind
sincerely virtual —
it was an impulse
that could not be
taken back.
It was bitter
and propulsive
clever in its coldness
deadly in its application.
A synthetic diamond
shit out by history
facts wrung from it
like wash on a clothesline.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gly cover one pe
still lose foot-hold / SKY
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ped I'm still full of dryness OPEN face
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d green purple yellow blue pink b
WHITE skins STRATEGIC A
/ blue sky same day gr
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STOP ---
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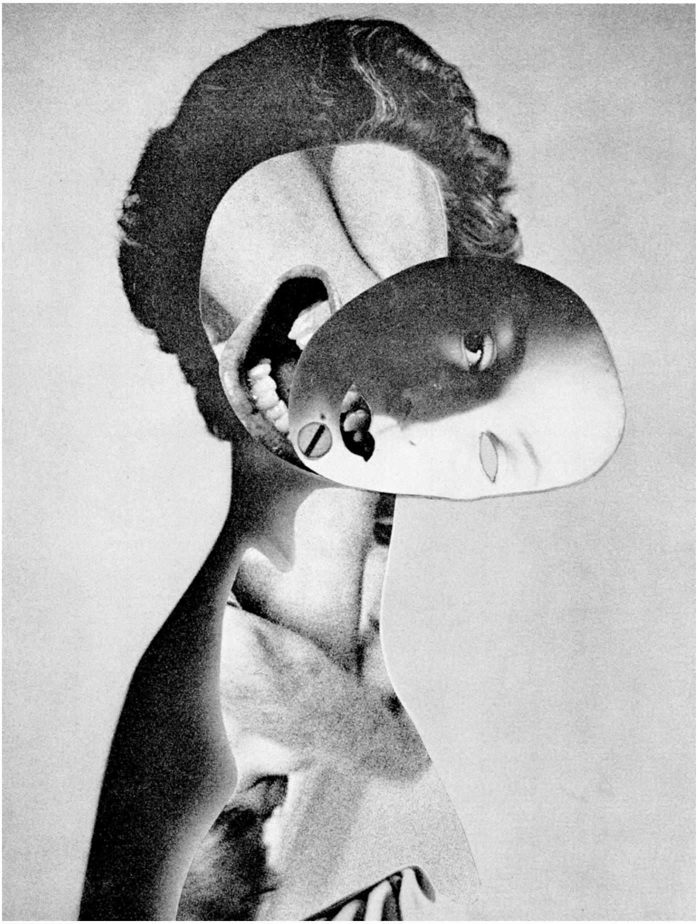
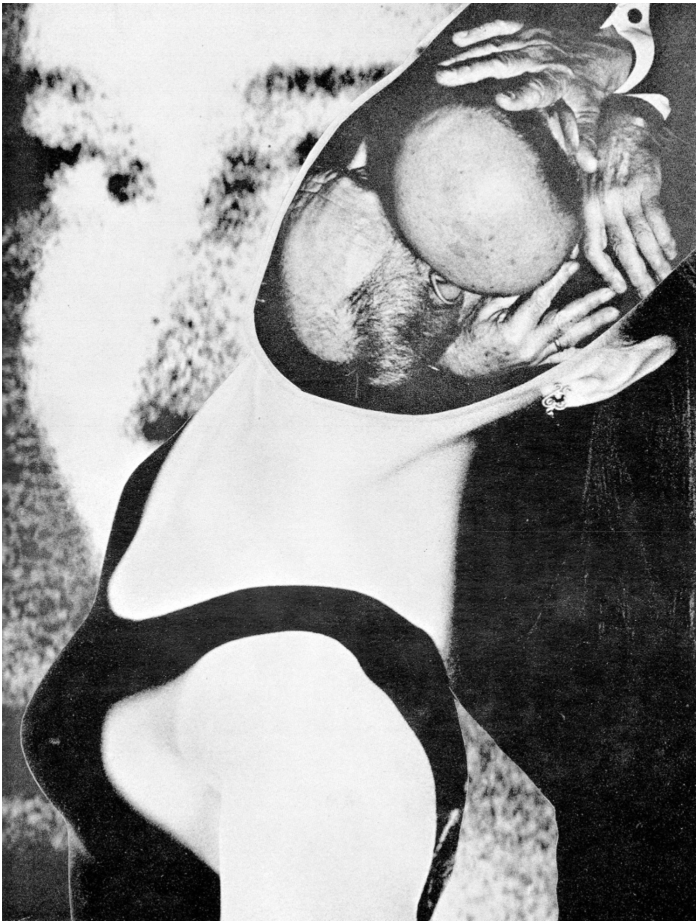
xxiii

At the secular end of days
when unconfined freedom
means gusts of opportunity
for all our computers to screw
every one of us beyond repair,
will the unspeakable terrors
reappear? What tech service
will patch our human flaws?
Not the rolling disaster
of passwords and holy water.
Not infernal church bells
pealing ones and zeros.
Everything real or digital
awaits an uncrackable code.



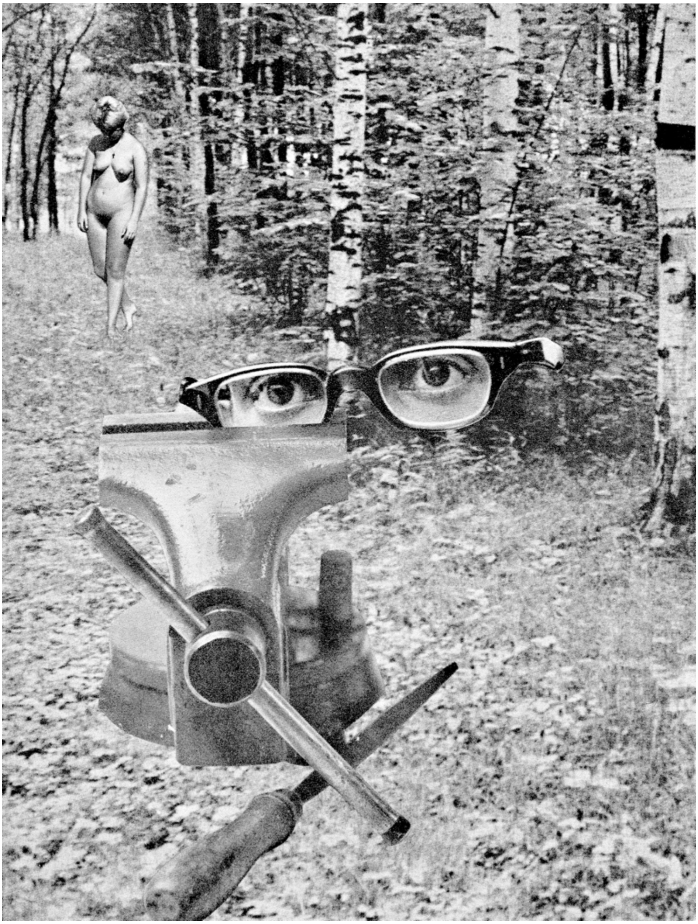
xxiv

He went unnamed —
the headline read
ANGEL RIDES
DISGUISED AS CABBIE.
But I knew him.
He snuck me love
and money —
my blue-eyed father,
a man not made of stone.
I leaned on him.
We leaned together,
homeless at home
like wanderers —
home again in an epitaph.



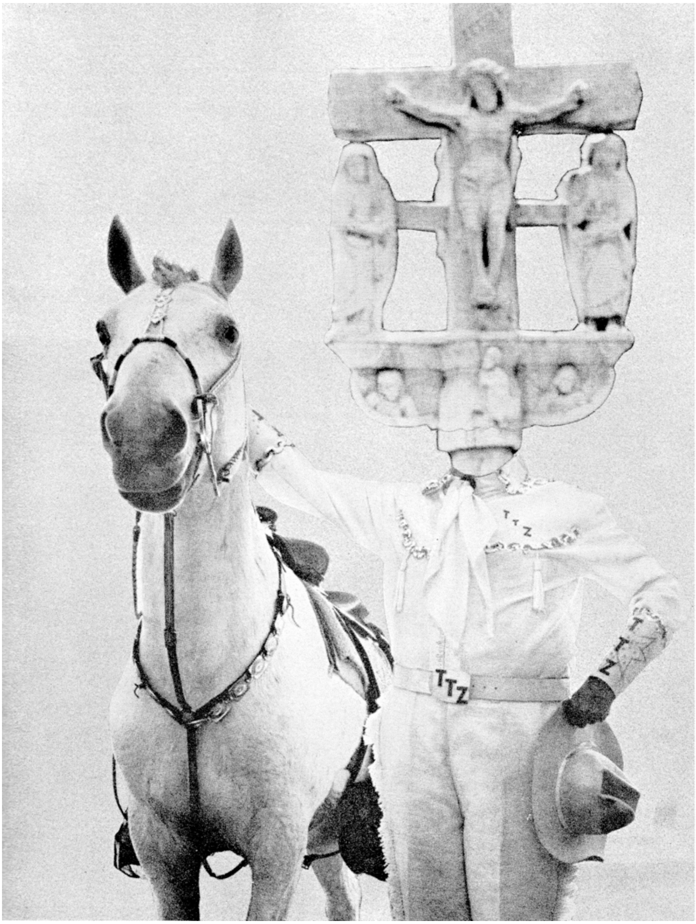
xxv

**The coffeehouse loop
that never ends
sounds heavenly
among the laptoppers.
Failure is not an option.
The fanfare of the horns
and the swell of the hi-hat
roll on like spooky dreams.
Fingers dance —
they fly like bats in a cave.
The gods if there are any
protect us
until closing time.
And then we rattle off.**



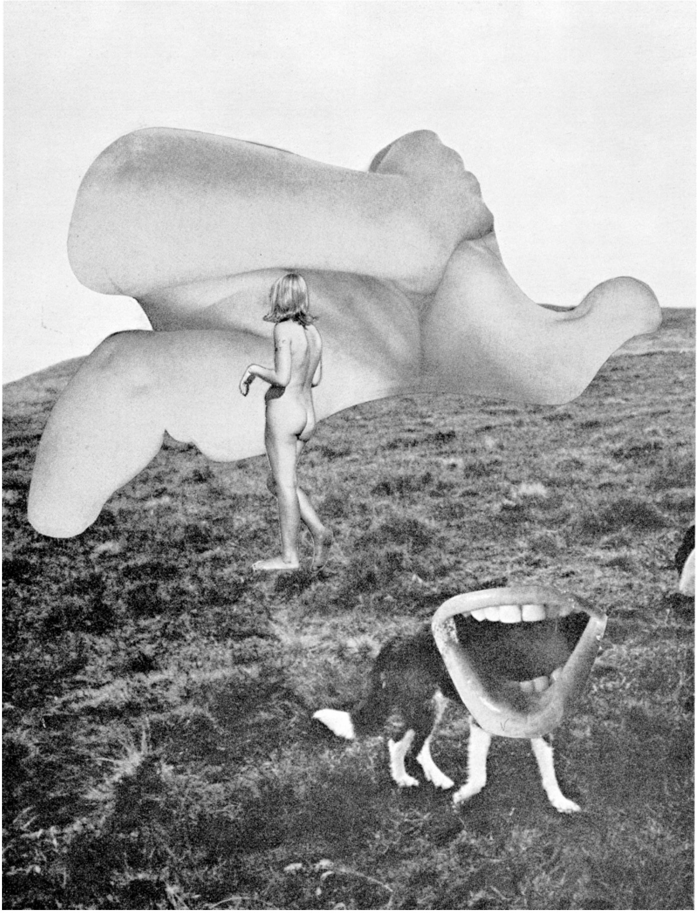
xxvi

Sobered by
the unavoidable,
unlike old men
who decorate
their memories,
some do not
redress the past
or change their tears
to pearls —
or foil the living truth
as though a beauty
brushing by
has blinded them
with scorn.


TTZ
TTZ
TTZ

xxvii

Death comes in all sizes —
sequoia, oak, and elm,
maple, birch, fir, and pine,
elephants and snails,
bumble bees and whales,
the Jews in the ovens,
Armenians slaughtered,
all the genocides before
and since. I am also dead
though I do not seem
as badly decomposed
as my wife's lost uncle
whose corpse was found
unburied, stinking, and alone.

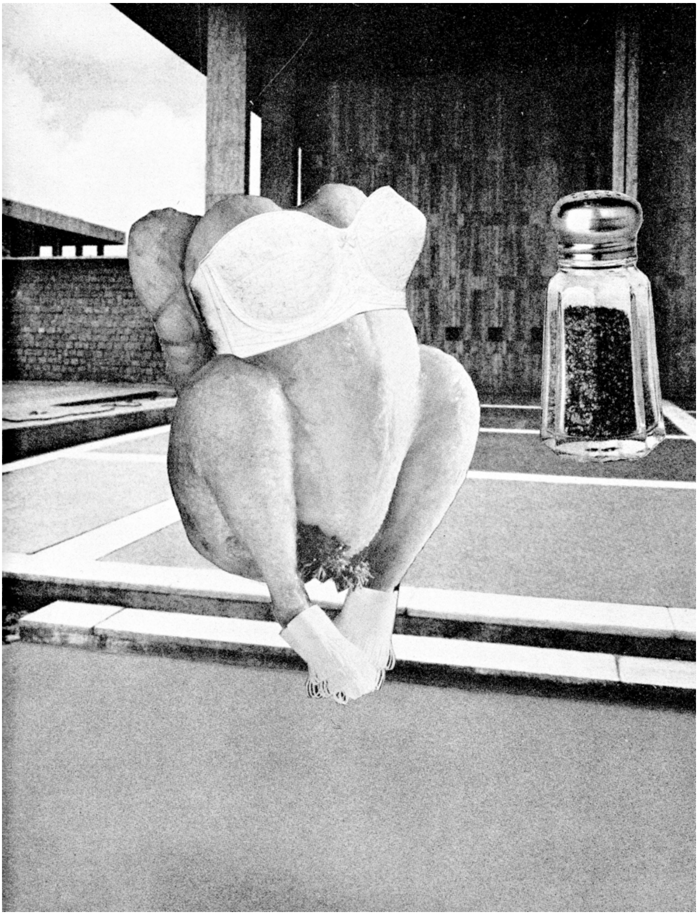


xxviii

“It was snowing
butterflies — ”
a storm at sea
as silent as
an untold secret.
Darwin’s marvels
left behind,
our ship sails on
through galaxies.
The voyage now
to ports unknown
too far from shore
for butterflies,
too fiery for snow.

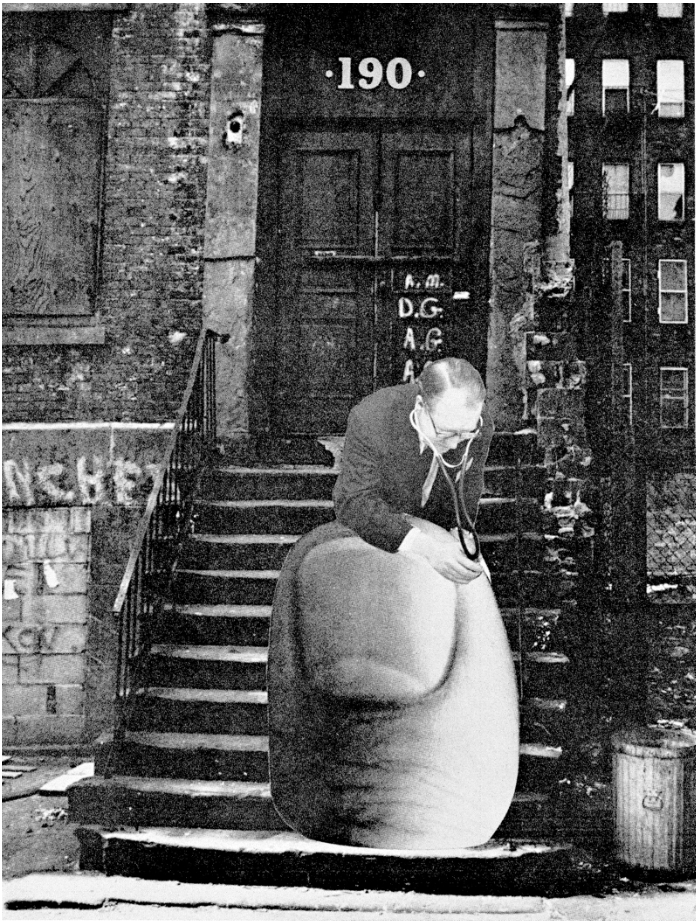
Your Obituary Is Waiting

We live in such a desperate age that any happiness
which we possess must be hidden like a deformity,
for we know that although all our nature revolts
we can create only through what we suffer.
— Cyril Connolly



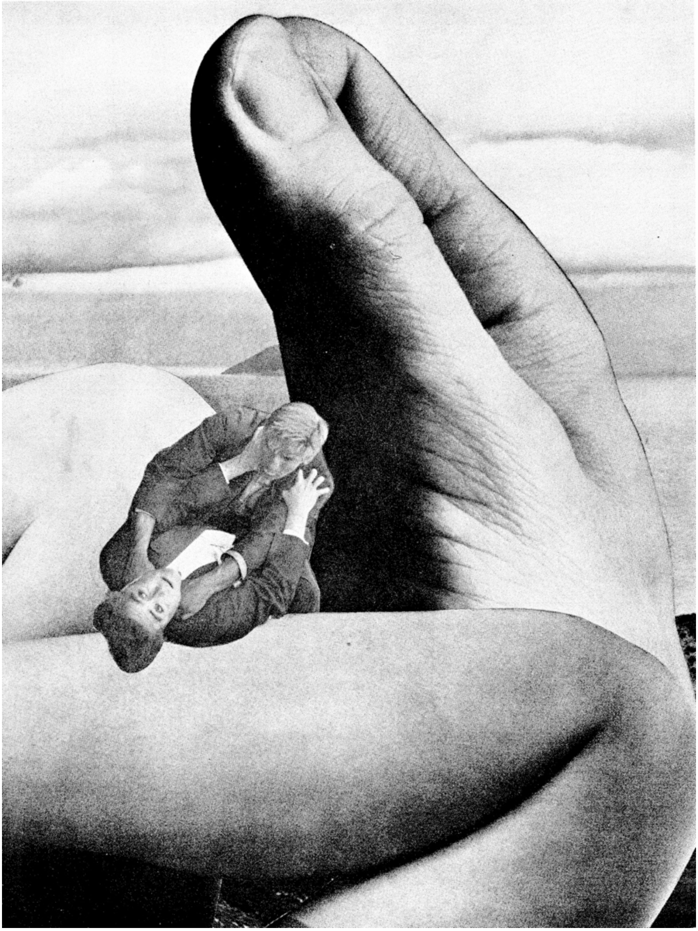
xxix

The longest deepest cut
escapes that pallid thing
mere talk upon the page.
It tears up desert sands,
sweeps whole plains away,
disdains the battle plans
of wet-nursed wonders,
while mad balloons
make circles in the clouds
cruising nowhere special,
unhanding memories
of mocked childhoods
still warm in their recall
but rarely spoken of at all.


·190·
A.M.
D.G.
A.G.

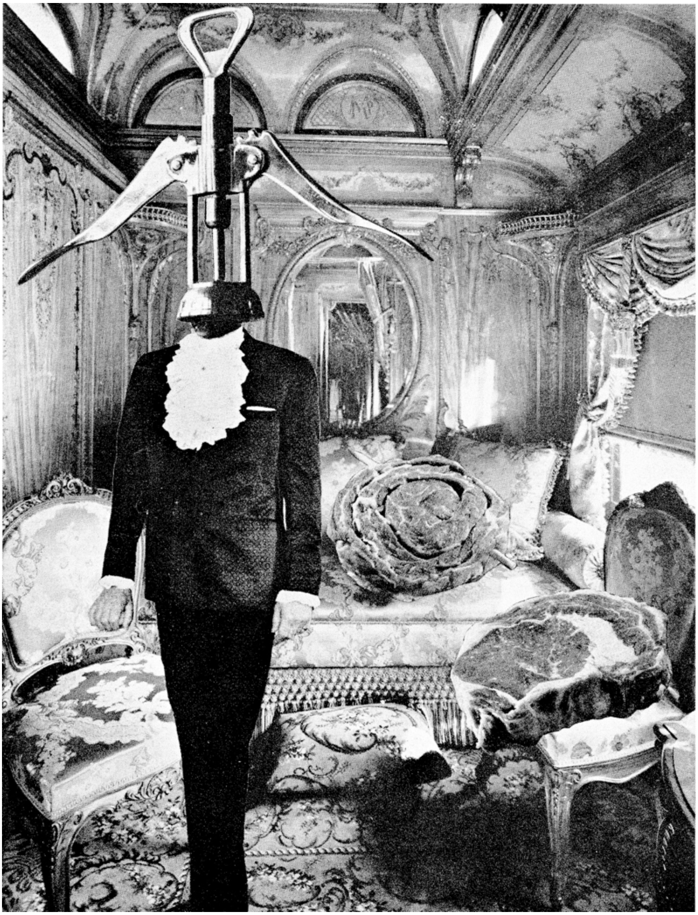
xxx

Seventy years ago
in Prospect Park, where
the future waited like a whim,
my childhood slipped through.
You held me with my arms
around your neck.
The carousel goes round
with our delicate ghosts
like shadows on a scrim.
The terrible wind
that carries us off
has not blown them away.
I smell the popcorn.
I hear the barrel organ.



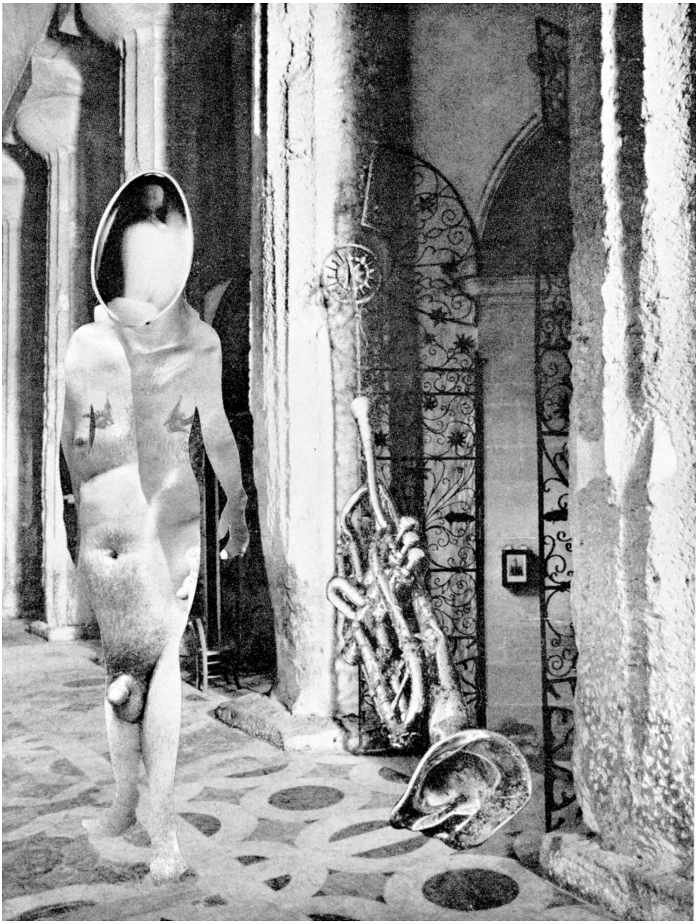
xxxi

She was meek
and splendidly learnèd.
He was reviled and tainted
strangled by bad luck
and worse misfortune.
She was tenacious
awaiting the executioner.
He was unfashionable,
broken on life's wheel.
Poor little bugs
when their end came,
both enflamed in pixels.
It was the holy business
of a claimed dominion.



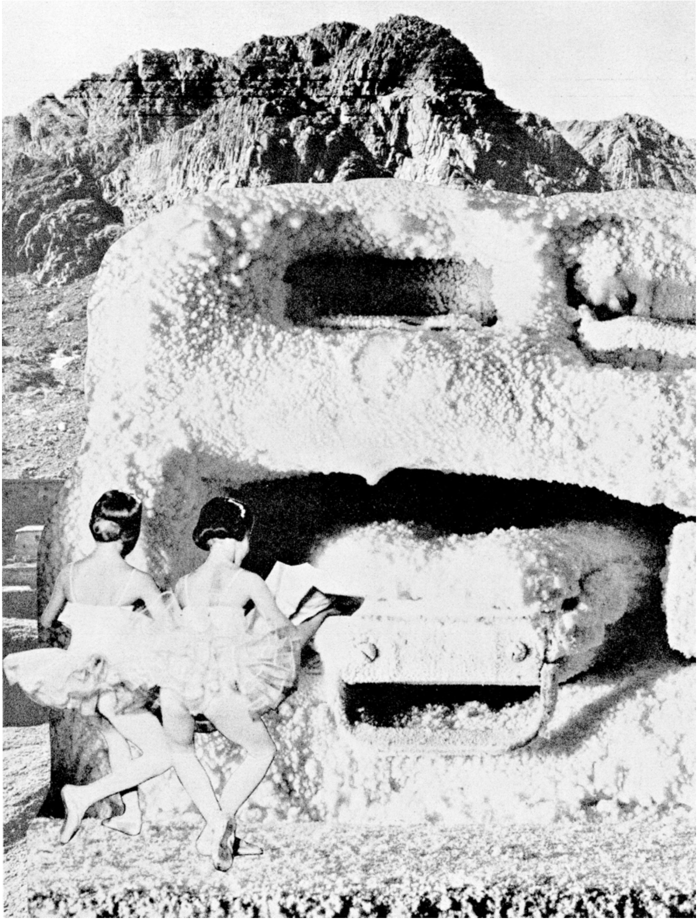
xxxii

**In the good old bad old days
he was fiery, almost crazed,
with anti-establishment fervor.
I admired many things about him,
respected most his raw courage.
The last time we spoke he was working
at an indie bookstore, the Abandoned Planet.
He downed a bottle of vodka and
blew his head off with an antique rifle.
Shades of Hemingway and Hunter T.
News of his death arrived
like Schrödinger's cat. I chose not
to open the box and heard him
say to me, "I am talking in the dark."**



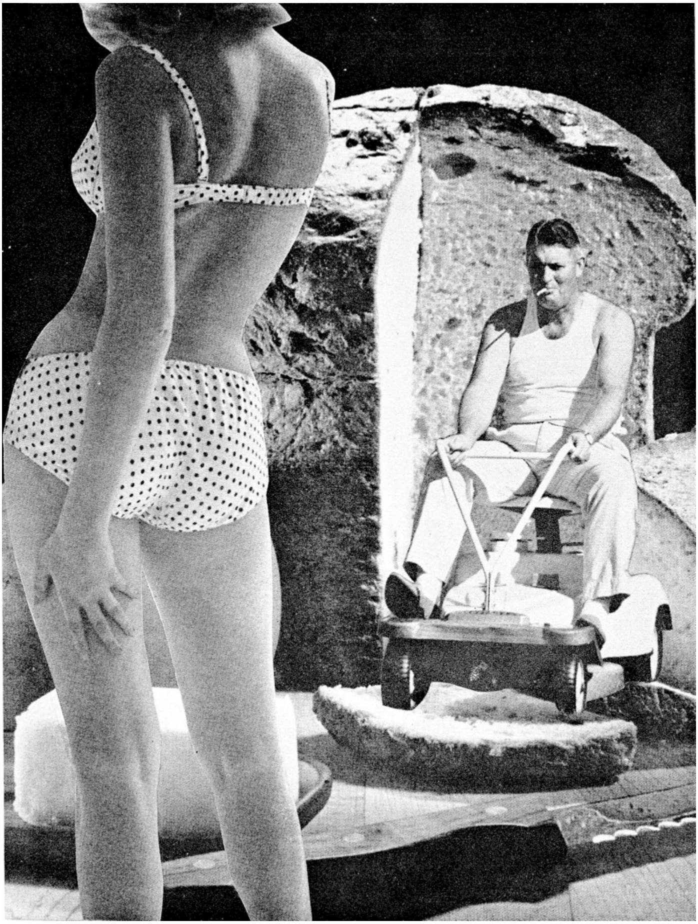
xxxiii

Stealthy quantum words
phantoms of expectation
and suicides of time
riddle us
with springs
and traps.
Self-delusion
streaming what we breathe
we who breathe in silence
bearing witness
like ancient beacons
of fading light
holding worlds
together & apart.



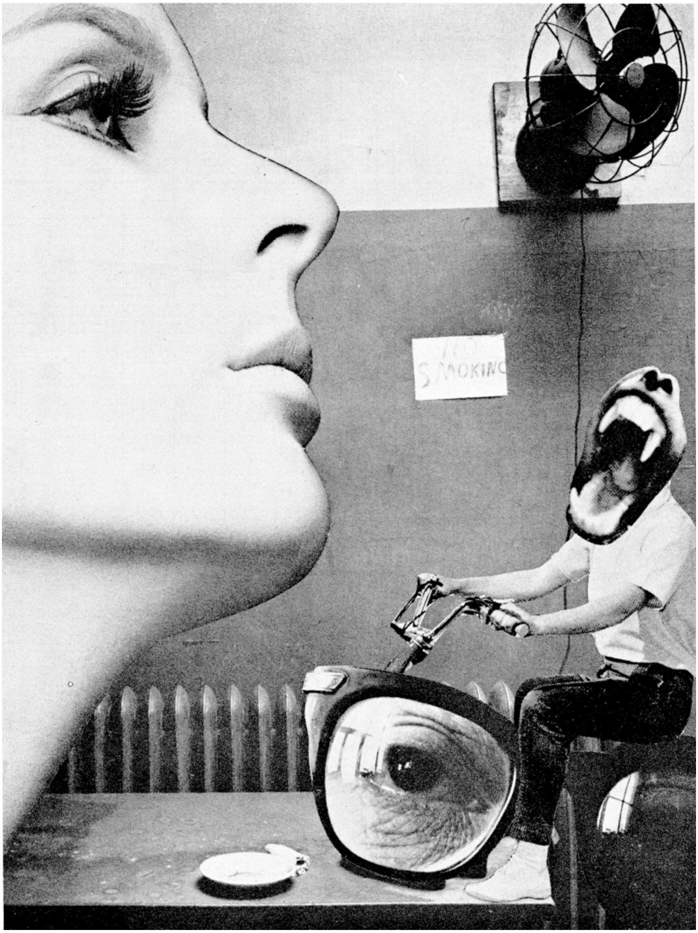
xxxiv

The indifferent spectator
heard the cry of a small bird
killed by an owl in the woods.
The cry was so intense
it passed into silence
like an unremembered dream.
Thus poets tormented
by doubts and depressions,
books lumpish and dull,
inexpressive and often a blur,
are free to claim the margin
of unexpressed astonishment.
Nothing is too extreme
for the sorrows of the living.



xxxv

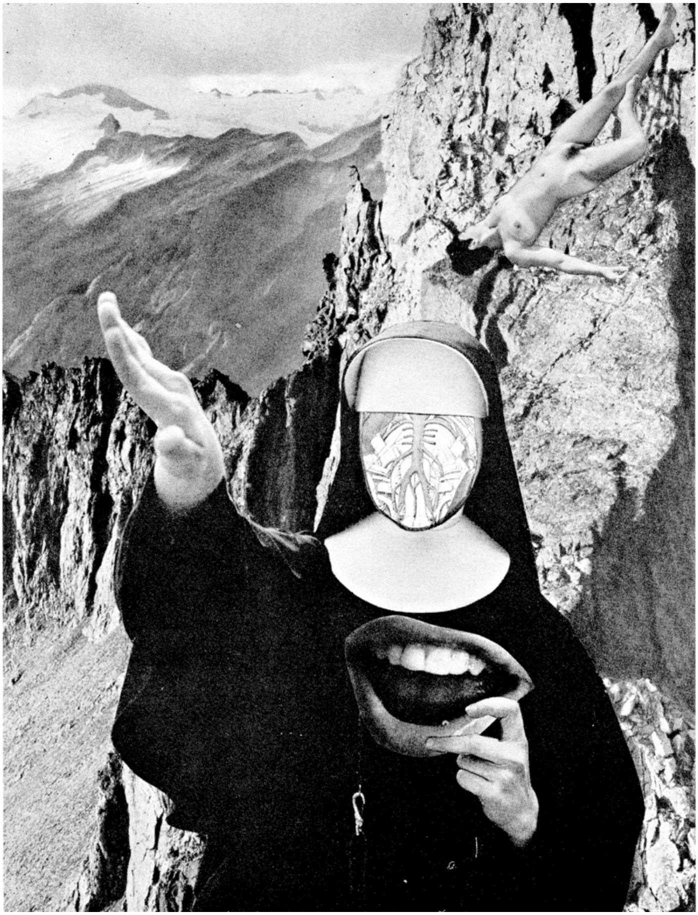
In the sawdust heart
of a puppet world,
where haughty Celia
ingloriously sits,
her failed prophecy
is buried by time,
perverted by history,
displaced and forgot
like a lost memorial
to the living dark.
Oh yes, Celia shits,
the summit of it all,
watered by the kind
reverence of the blind.



NO SMOKING

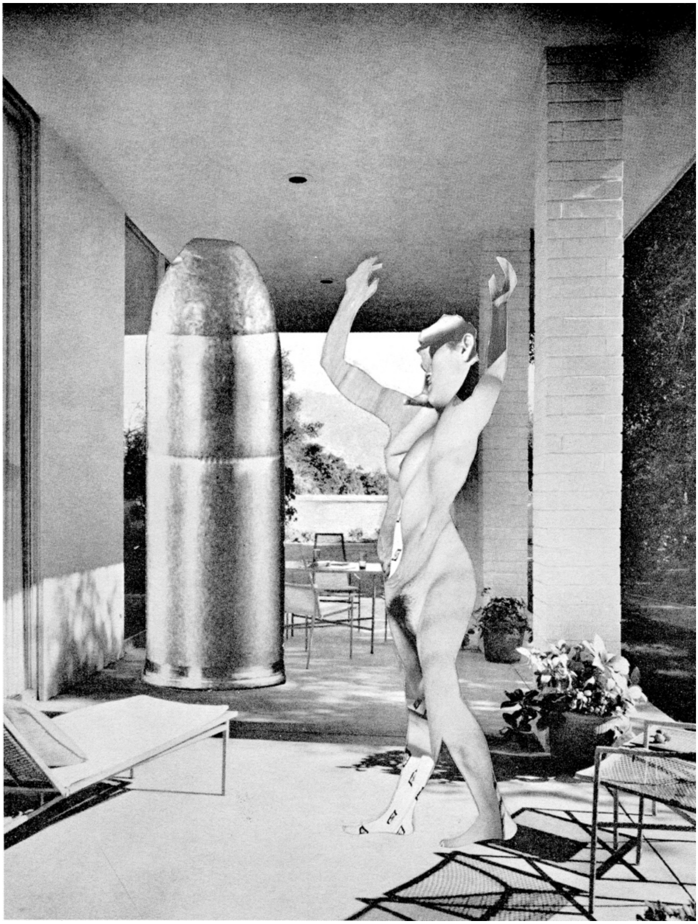
xxxvi

“Coraggio” —
my old friend said.
And then he put
the gun to his head.
***Coraggio* —**
That’s what it took
to blunt the pain
with a hunk of lead.
***Coraggio* —**
It’s no walk in the park.
The night is cold,
and my friend is dead.
Courage, like so much slag,
was carried off in a body bag.



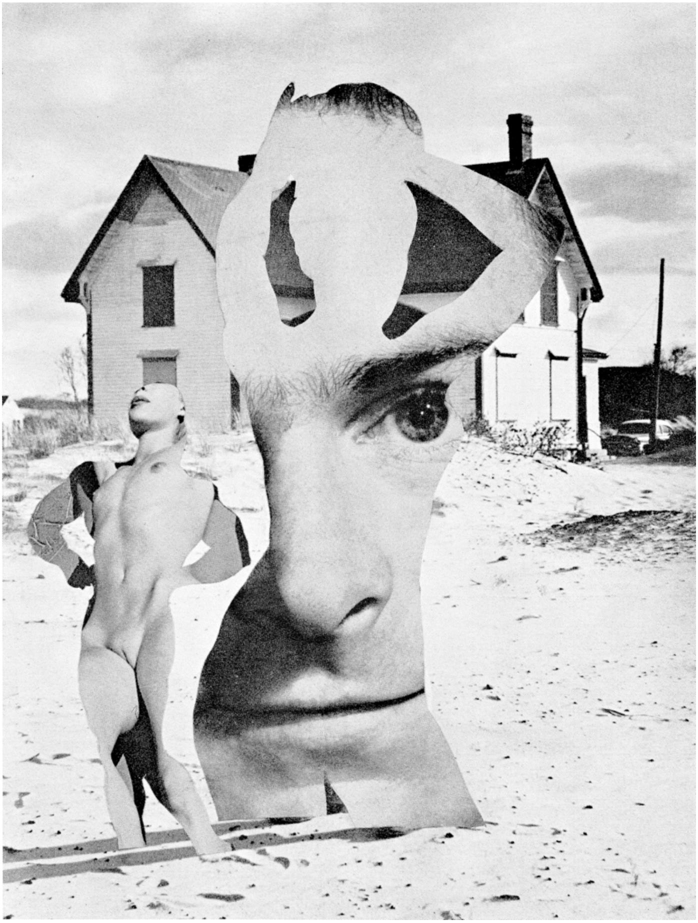
xxxvii

The corpse blinked
dead but alive
dreaming awake.
Had the algorithm
been misplaced?
Was it “life-in-death”
within the body bag
or “death-in-life”?
Signaling the dreamer,
the corpse winked
but could not speak —
or would not.
I woke
and no sleep came.



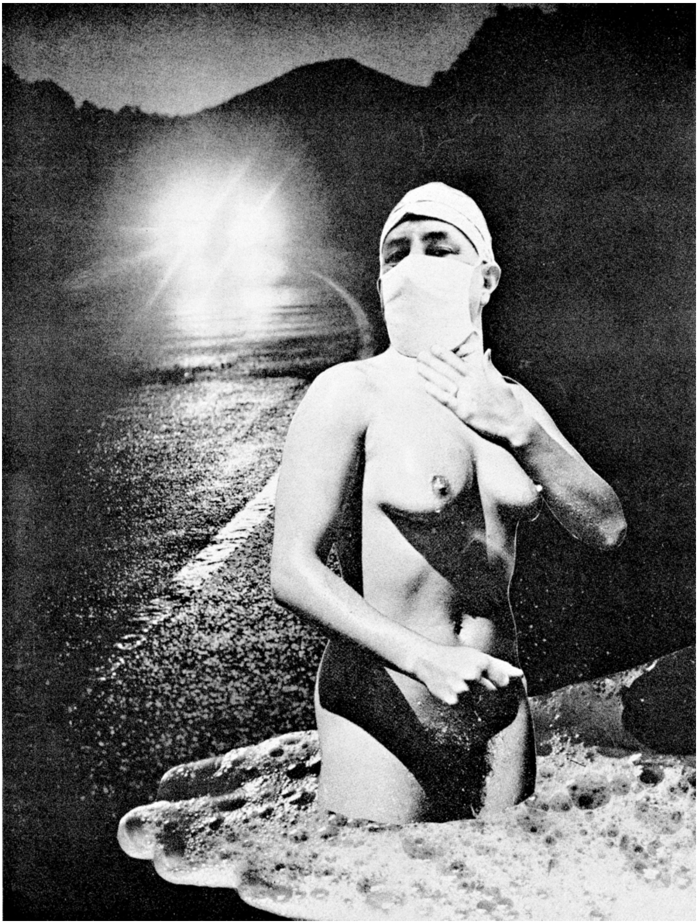
xxxviii

My ego prefers
an obit published
by the NY Times.
But anywhere else
will do, even etched
into a headstone
that nobody reads
in a cemetery where
nobody ever goes.
I don't know why
I care, but I do.
I don't know why
anyone should care,
but it's the custom to.



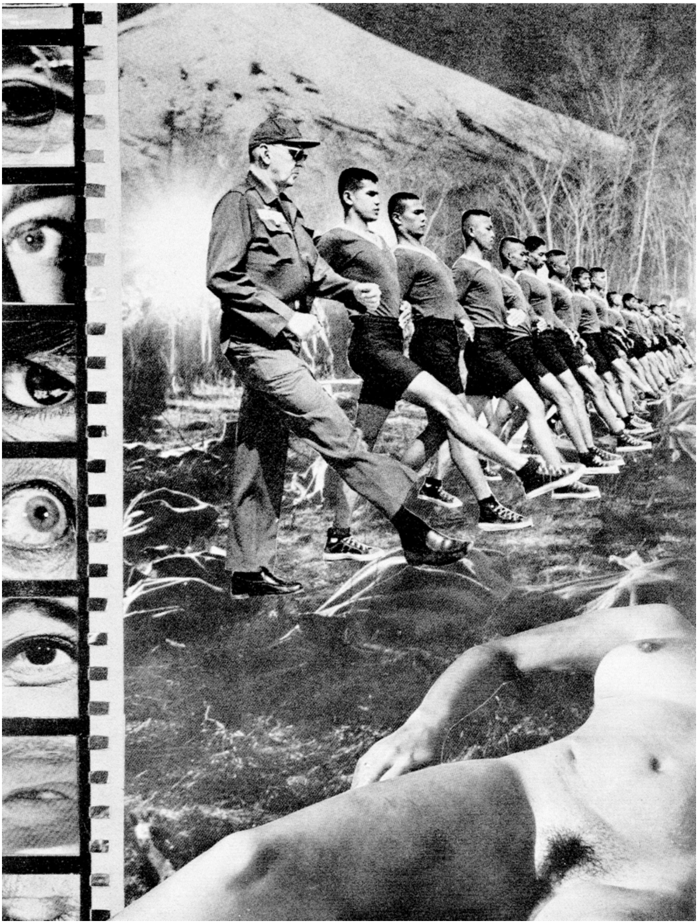
xxxix

The first day of spring
a blinding white curtain
kidnapped the city.
It was a true blast of winter.
We solemn jurors braved
the monster nor'easter
and did our solemn duty
at forty dollars a day,
the price of a shovel.
Like heavily falling snow,
white privilege shrouded
the streets — but here,
we joked ever so lightly,
it is officially verboten.



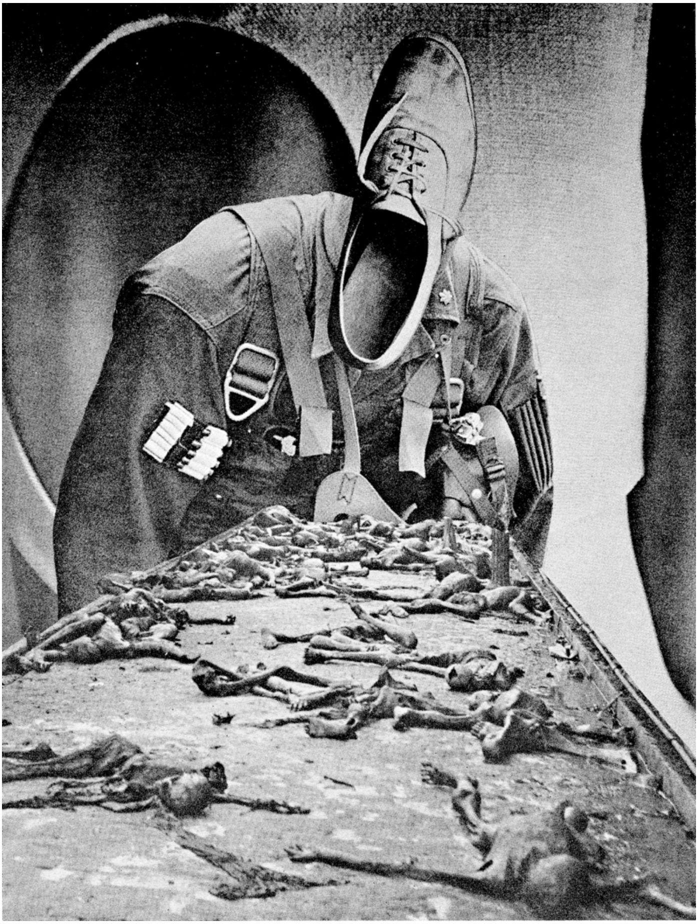
xl

Kneaded
from the stuff
we call our brains,
a fabric
of wrong things,
a smugness
of highest thoughts
and lowest stains,
incongruities
are the nature
of the beast
we are pleased
to suffer
and call the world.



xli

Incandescent poet
in your solitary cell,
answer please
what no prayer
or deity can tell.
"To make sense of what is meant
by your obscurities, the consequence —
have little doubt — of an accident,
your gospel may not be truth,
but clouds and planets,
patterns in the sky.
The proper question
is what to ponder
for an answer . . ."



xlii

The tyranny of rhyme —
the shivering branch,
the perishing flower —
makes everything a crime.
Cops and finks who comb
their hair with signatures
let us know — don’t laugh —
that integrity and sincerity
are not the same.
This unmarked plot of earth
is primeval and forever —
but we who are as transient
as flowers that do not flourish
give it unintended birth.

ENVOI

Joys that children know
before the years have taken them —
before age and grief scald their eyes
with burning tears —
bring happiness without remorse.
But even sweetest lies
(the bright vermillion
of wayward litanies and disbelief)
wear out the bond of trust.
And humiliation
so withholds relief
that the cauldron of despair
is unbearable though brief,
a silent empire against conciliation.

NOTES

Jan Herman was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1942. During the 1960s, while working at City Lights Books as poet-publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti's assistant, he founded the Nova Broadcast Press and *The San Francisco Earthquake,* a little magazine that published Beat, post-Beat, and Fluxus writers and artists. He moved on to Dick Higgins's Something Else Press, in Vermont, as editor in chief and later covered the arts as a cultural journalist for the *Chicago Sun-Times, The Daily News* in New York, and the *Los Angeles Times,* as well as for MSNBC.com, where he was a senior editor and the theater critic. His writing has appeared in many publications, including *The New York Times Book Review, The Journal of Film History, Partisan Review, IT: International Times, the Magazine of Resistance,* and *Chicago Quarterly Review*. His literary and production papers for *Earthquake* and Nova Broadcast are held in the Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections at Northwestern University.

NOTES

Norman Ogue Mustill (1931-2013) was a little-known master collagist. His work appeared in scattered places and has never been collected or even seen by any but a few devotees.

The forty-two collages pictured in these pages appear in the same sequence in which they were originally published in 1967 by Beach Books, Texts and Documents under the title *Flypaper*. Their juxtaposition opposite these forty-two midnight sonnets is not intended to illustrate the sonnets, nor are the sonnets meant as commentaries on the collages. The words and the images exist side by side to honor our longtime friendship. If there are exchanges of meaning or parallel references, they are welcome.

Norman and I collaborated on a variety of projects during the late 1960s. His work was featured on two covers of my San Francisco little magazine *Earthquake*. His collages also appeared within the magazine, and I brought out two pamphlets of his, *Twinpak* and *Messkit,* under the Nova Broadcast Press imprint. Together we produced three issues of VDRSVP, a counterculture newsprint broadsheet.

NOTES

It is no accident that so few have seen Mustill's collages. Norman refused to play the art game. He shunned publicity and guarded his privacy at any cost. Less curmudgeon than extreme dissenter, he resembled William S. Burroughs in this respect: Nothing pleased him more than reaming out the human race. His compositions stopped you dead with their viciousness, let alone their technical perfection and satirical intent.

Which is not to say that he lacked a lightness of touch. To the contrary, he could lower the boom, playfully, whenever he liked. Consider that he took his middle name "Ogue" from the fashion magazine *Vogue* as a one-word manifesto against everything fashionable. If you were lucky enough to know him, you'd find yourself chortling amid gales of laughter. He loved to entertain his friends by taking note of the world's solemnities and making exquisite fun of them. It was a supreme delight. — *JH*

Fourteen

"I saw the cold glitter" owes a debt to Joseph Roth. "In the dirty stockings of Adolf" owes a debt to Charles Bukowski and refers to Boris Lurie's "railroad collage." "Was it a vivace sneer when Solomon said" owes a debt to John Gross. "In the pitch black" refers to the death of Carl Weissner on the night of Jan. 23 or in the early morning hours of Jan. 24, 2012. His ashes were buried at the Hauptfriedhof Mannheim. "Is someone hammering" is dedicated to Edgar Allen Poe. "in these lines was derived from the section titles of Malcolm Ritchie's book of poems *small lines on the great earth.* "The more books we read" and "Observe how they are written" are derived from cut-ups of a foreword to Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* by J. H. Plumb in combination with Cyril Connolly's *The*

NOTES

Unquiet Grave. "… vif, ardent, et fou—" was written for Gerard Bellaart and owes a debt to Alyse Gregory.

Mortal Coil

"Walked to a hanging" owes a debt to Evelyn Waugh. "Past hopes" owes a debt to Edward Dahlberg and Francis Bacon. In "A simple piano piece" the quotation from Dante's "Inferno" is from a translation by Clive James. "Mary B foretold" owes a debt to W.H. Auden. Mary Beach drew horoscope charts in great detail for people she knew who piqued her interest. "When words died" is dedicated to Siobhan Tucker. "Kisses did not last" owes a debt to Keith Seward. "Deliberately faulty" is dedicated to W.H. Auden. "At the secular end of days" is dedicated to Simon Schama. In "He went unnamed—" the headline *ANGEL RIDES* … is from a human-interest feature story by Gabriel Pressman that appeared in The New York World-Telegram & The Sun, in 1952; the story gave rise to the sonnet. "The coffeehouse loop" is dedicated to Heathcote Williams. "Sobered by" is dedicated to Michel de Montaigne and owes a debt to Boris Pasternak, Cyril Connolly, and Sir Walter Raleigh. "It was snowing" is dedicated to William S. Burroughs. The quotation "It was snowing butterflies" is from Darwin's *The Voyage of the Beagle.*

Your Obituary Is Waiting

"The longest deepest cut" is dedicated to Virginia Woolf and owes a debt to Joseph Addison. "Seventy years ago" is dedicated to my father and owes a debt to Abbie Conant. "She was meek" is dedicated to Wislawa Szymborski and

NOTES

owes a debt to Edward White. “In the good old bad old days” is dedicated to John Bryan. “Stealthy quantum words” is dedicated to William Osborne and owes a debt to Brion Gysin. “The indifferent spectator” is dedicated to Thomas Hardy and owes a debt to Virginia Woolf. “In the sawdust heart” is dedicated to Cyril Connolly and owes a debt to Alistair Cooke, William Hazlitt, and Jonathan Swift. “Coraggio” is dedicated to Norman O. Mustill. “The corpse blinked” is dedicated to William Butler Yeats. “My ego prefers” is dedicated to Philip Larkin. “The tyranny of rhyme” owes a debt to Vladimir Nabokov, Frank Scully, E.M. Foster, and André Previn, and is dedicated with “Incandescent poet” to Sinclair Beiles.

The photograph of the author is by Janet Leong Herman. The photograph of Norman O. Mustill is by the Arizona Department of Motor Vehicles.